-TITLE-LARSEN ZEZETTE (Van der Sluis)

-I\_DATE-

-SOURCE-ONE GENERATION AFTER BOSTON

-RESTRICTIONS-

-SOUND\_QUALITY-

-IMAGE\_QUALITY-

-DURATION-

-LANGUAGES-

-KEY\_SEGMENT-

-GEOGRAPHIC\_NAME-

-PERSONAL\_NAME-

-CORPORATE\_NAME-

-KEY\_WORDS-

-NOTES-

-CONTENTS-

00:00:00 I was born in Brussels, in Belgium

00:00:30 I was born in 1932, in February. Lived for a couple of

years in Boulogne, in France. My mother was French, my father

Dutch. Then back to Brussels.

00:01:00 Until 1943. My name is Zezette, not a common name. I

had another name, Clemence. Both names were difficult for English

to pronounce. It was changed during the war.

00:01:30 I did not have a Yiddish name. I came from an absolutely

non-religious family. I did not have a Hebrew name.

00:02:00 I am not sure how my mother met my father. She was born

in France. At one point, her parents moved to Belgium. His

business was there. They met and married.

00:02:00 There is a tendency to idealize what you don't have, but

I'm saying it with great conviction. They were loving, caring, and

over protective. I'm talking about the beginning of the war, and

they're trying to

00:02:30 protect me from the suffering. I was a young child, and

now maybe I label that as over protective. My father had a great

sense of humor. So did my mother.

00:03:00 I'm sure that carries through the family. A love for

life. She loved to sing and I cannot, but I have a love of music.

My father just being a nice person. I think that the 11 years that

they gave me.

00:03:30 And I say that with conviction, must have been very god

because it left me, even though there were some hard years, left me

as a caring person.

00:04:00 I have a brother. He is still alive. My brother was not

in a concentration camp. He is older. He was not at home when we

were picked up in 1943.

00:04:30 I adore my brother to this day. You are touching on a

hard subject. I think Marcel suffers so much

00:05:00 of the guilt of the survivors, that he and I have never

talked of the past, of my parents. It is only in the past several

years that I have been able to talk more, and what he talks about

00:05:30 "Your" parents, or about "our" parents. he will not talk

about the war years.

Q: What was your father's business?

00:06:00 The textile business. He was a salesman. He had to

travel. Between Holland and Belgium. Most of the time he came

home evenings.

00:06:30 I think he was successful. We never wanted of anything.

Lived a reasonably comfortable life. His name was Henri. His

parents were Dutch.

00:07:00 I have no recollection of where his parents were born.

My mother's name was Ester de Rose. They were of Sephardic

background, but not all religious.

00:07:30 We were definitely Jewish. But formal Jewish education

was not part of our lives.

00:08:00 We celebrated Jewish holidays to a minimal degree. We

were completely assimilated into the life of Brussels. We knew we

were Jewish, but that did not mean going to Temple.

00:08:30 A way of life but not a conviction. I went to public

school.

00:09:00 We knew we were Jewish, but did not connect at all with

any synagogue. It did not come up until 1940. It did not come.

00:09:30 Into our conversation.

Q: What are some of your memories?

00:10:00 I had a big brother who was really a pain in the neck,

who took a tremendous amount of pleasure in teasing me. I think

that I served as a conduit.

00:10:30 When he liked one of my girlfriends and wanted to make

contact, then I was the best sister he had. otherwise if I had to

take medicine, and forgot, he was the one reminding my mother.

00:11:00 The reason I mention the very affectionate woman she was

is, and maybe I remember because of the pain of separation, there

was a ritual.

00:11:30 Every day - we lived on the second floor of an apartment

building and my mother had to say good-bye ten times and wave

watching me down the street. And it was reciprocal.

00:12:00 That was a ritual. Like getting up every morning. She

was an exceptionally warm person and so was my father.

00:12:30 I don't remember how far my mother's education went, but

I do remember she was involved in a number of activities involving

school. She was always home when we arrived.

00:13:00 My father was very curious politically, though not

involved. I remember many conversations that were beyond anything

I was interested in.

00:13:30 I think they were both intellectually curious and reading

was very much part of my family life. Papers and books around the

house. They were inquisitive people.

00:14:00 They took the education my brother and I were getting

very seriously. They were helpful with the homework.

Q: Did you have any extended family living nearby?

00:14:30 Yes, in Brussels, I had one aunt and several people I

called aunt. My father's family was mostly in Holland - he had two

sisters and one brother.

00:15:00 I had cousins. The 49 people within my immediate family

just never came back. My father's family, one sister and his

brother were hidden during the war.

00:15:30 One sister went to Bergen-Belsen with her husband, and he

died there. The sister died about 10 years ago.

Q: The language you spoke in the home was French?

00:16:00 Our common language was French.

Q: You were such a young girl when the situation developed. What

was your experience?

00:16:30 I'm very conscious of their listening to the BBC and

trying to make sure we were not involved in listening. My brother,

who was four years older than me, tried to explain what he

understood.

00:17:00 In 1940, when the Germans invaded, I was so young, but I

knew it was frightening, I knew there was pain at home, but I did

not understand.

00:17:30 In 1940, we left Brussels and started trying to leave the

country walking to the border of France. But i did not understand.

00:18:00 I knew that the routine that kids get so used to, so

comfortable in, was completely gone. I was frightened. Events

occurred so quickly.

00:18:30 We were being dislocated, and parents were focussed not

only on their children but many other things.

00:19:00 I continued to go to school for a very short time. When

the Jews were told to wear the yellow stars, was when my life

started changing.

00:19:30 For the first time I realized I was not like all the

other kids, I was wearing a Jewish star. Clear memory of walking

in Brussels with my father and wearing a star.

00:20:00 Walking in the center of Brussels and German soldiers

coming down the same sidewalk and my father being pushed off the

sidewalk. it's very vivid.

00:20:30 It stays in my memory. It was shortly thereafter that a

decision was made that we had to separate and my parents

00:21:00 Moved into another neighborhood and rented the lower

level of a house. In a suburb of Brussels. It was also the time

00:21:30 I was separated from them. It was a moment - I'm sure

it was not that - I was told that my name is not Zezette and my

last name was not Van de Sluis - Larsen is my Married name

00:22:00 My name was marguerite Mechels (ph)

00:22:30 I was going to a Catholic convent, boarding school. I

was told to do what the other kids did, not to talk about my

parents.

00:23:00 It was a very quick separation. It was the beginning of

1942 my brother

00:23:30 was sent to another part of Belgium, to a Trappist

monastery. I was brought to the Catholic convent by some friends

who were not Jewish.

00:24:00 I lived there until 1943.

00:24:30 One of the things I remember very clearly - obviously at

the beginning, going into a world that was so foreign to me, it's

so vivid.

00:25:00 In late afternoon, I heard a bell being rung, and saw all

the kids lining up on two sides of the corridor

00:25:30 Putting a veil on their head, which I did, and going into

the chapel. We went to chapel every morning and AFTERNOON BEING

CONSCIOUS TO KNEEL WITH THE OTHER KIDS and get up with them.

00:26:00 I tried to move my lips because I had no idea what they

were saying. I think the trauma of that day, the events of the day

must have been so traumatic that I see it in front of me so

clearly.

00:26:30 In any case, I became Marguetie M. I didn't say much

though before I had a lot of joie de vivre.

00:27:00 However, it disappeared pretty quickly being in this

environment. I went to confession. I didn't have anyone to talk

to, I didn't know what was going on

00:27:30 with my parents nor my brother. In many ways it was the

beginning of me becoming a robot.

00:28:00 Doing what people told me to do. Maybe that's why now I

don't like to do what people tell me. I don't remember if it was

three months after I entered

00:28:30 or a little more, I spoke with one of the priests. I had

to share - as I look at it now, I felt I had to tell the truth and

maybe someone would tell me where is my family.

00:29:00 The result was that I was baptized. I guess that was

their way of making me, quote, legitimate. I had been taking

communion every day because everyone else had been.

00:29:00 So I was BAPTIZED Catholic. There was a small ceremony.

A few sisters were there and this priest. My life didn't change.

I didn't learn where my parents were.

00:29:30 The interesting thing to me was that there were a group-

of people who knew I was Jewish and being hidden in the convent.

They took a risk with my being there. It could have turned out

very different. I didn't realize this.

00:30:00 In 1943, the people who had brought me, came to see me,

and I begged them to let me see my parents. They told me about

them but it was so strange, I needed to see them.

00:30:30 In Easter 1943, I went to see my parents. I,m smiling

because I remember it as such a wonderful reunion.

00:33:00 I knew that I had to go back. Did I understand what was

going on? No, I was so young. I only suffered the trauma. Even

today I don't understand.

00:35:30 Easter Sunday, my father decided that we would go

fishing, the three of us. My mother, my father and myself. We

left at dawn and we spent a wonderful day.

00:36:00 I remember that vividly. We came back when it was dark.

But we were followed. That night the knock came.

00:36:30 (Wipes away tears) And we were picked up. I have a very

vivid memory from the knock.

00:37:00 No, we weren't wearing the Jewish star. I think we were

denounced, and that my parents probably had been.

00:37:30 It was just a coincidence that I was home. They also

didn't go out very much. Very seldom.

00:38:00 Your parents were passing as non-Jews and that is why

they moved to a different part of town?

A: No, they were not passing as non-Jews. They went into hiding.

00:38:30 When they had to report to M? which was like the holding

camp for Jews. From there people were sent to Birkenau. But they

had registered as Jews. When they were caught, they were wearing

a star, and I was.

00:39:00 I'm sorry, I didn't explain, - they went into hiding, I

went to the boarding school, and my brother to the monastery. The

day we went fishing, I cannot tell you whether we were wearing the

star, probably we were not.

00:39:30 When the knock came, we were transported to Maline.

Luckily, my brother was not home. There was no evidence of my

brother.

00:40:00 They just pulled us out. It is a vivid memory, mostly of

their tears, their complete sense of helplessness. They knew where

they were going. I did not. We stayed in Maline for about

00:40:30 Four of five days. We were transported by bus, or rather

"camions," its a truck.

00:41:00 The days at Maline are vivid to me, because there was no

way there my parents could protect me for others' conversation.

00:41:30 Although I didn't understand what was going on brut I saw

people suffering.

00:42:00 The week after Easter, 1943, we went on the train, and

that was that. My memory of the train

00:42:30 My parents had become two very old people. The memories

are that of the stench, of the screaming, of my mother putting a

spoon through the bars

00:43:00 to collect rain, to get some water to give me. Where she

had gotten it I have no idea.

00:43:30 We had cans of condensed milk, and of her stuffing me

with it, hoping to - I don't know.

00:44:00 We were on the train for days. Then we arrived in

Birkenau. As I have told you, I have gone back three times now.

00:44:30 I call it the end of the line. And for me it is. Again,

its the things you know and that have been written about. Its. at

that point.

00:45:00 I was holding on to my mother's arm and vice versa, and

by hindsight that was probably a big mistake. The fact that I was

holding on so dearly to her

00:45:30 probably contributed to her going to the right and me to

the left. My father went to the men's camp, she went straight into

the crematorium.

00:46:00 I went into the camp. I have very vivid memories of

prisoners - of coming out of the train and looking at skeleton

walking.

00:46:30 Trying to grab whatever we had. I said to you earlier I

had become something of a robot doing what I was supposed to do.

00:47:00 Talking very little. And i think at that point I became

a robot. - Seeing - being pulled from my mother.

00:47:30 I don't talk about the years in Birkenau. First of all,

00:48:00 much has been written by people more eloquent than I. My

vocabulary doesn't contain any words to describe those years.

00:48:30 I don't think those words exist in the English language

or any language. I also don't think that's the object of us

talking together.

00:49:00 The reality was that, because I was Jewish, my life was

stopped. My mother went into the gas chambers.

00:49:30 Two absolutely wonderful human beings who were, "quote",

of the wrong religion, who's life was stopped.

00:50:00 Because of the insanity of a regime. I saw my father one

time. He gave his ration of potato peels.

00:50:30 To come to the women's camp to see me. We did not talk.

We both had shaved heads.

00:51:00 We were very thin. But again this is a vivid

recollection for me. This was the last time I saw him.

00:51:30 My assumption is that my father died in the death march

when we were evacuated. I saw him sometime in '44. I have to

00:52:00 I think THAT IS APROPOS IF THE TAPE IS GOING TO HAVE some

value for young people, one has to find reasons, the absolute

00:52:30 Lack of where he died, or how, I'm telling you he died of

a death march - I have no idea.

00:53:00 It makes more sense that way than not to know. I came

back in July, 1945. I spent three months in a hospital in Leipzig.

Actually what happened - from Auschwitz

00:53:30 I went to Ravensberg in Buchenwald. I marched - it was

the spring of '45. There were no calendars.

00:54:00 On the last march - at one point

00:54:30 I just sat down. I was a pretty sick kid. I didn't

think about the consequences. If I was going to die, I was going

to die.

00:55:00 The march went on. There were relatively few SS left

with us at that time. There were few people - really skeletons

00:55:30 After a while, they continued to march and I got myself

up. I started to walk in the direction opposite to them, and

walked right into the arms of two American soldiers.

00:56:00 That's something that's as clear to me as two and two is

four. Then I don't remember how, I found myself in the hospital.

I was transported back by the Red Cross to Belgium.

00:56:30 Q: in 1943, you were 10 or 11, very young, why do you

think you were treated as an adult?

A: It hard to give you an answer, just as it is hard to answer the

question. "How come you came back?"

00:57:00 I don't know the answer. In my better mood days, I would

tell you it was just luck. Pure luck, pure coincidence, whatever.

Yes, I am one of the youngest ones.

00:57:30 I don't think I looked any more mature than the others.

I know a cousin who is still alive, but we haven't talked about

this. I don't know the answer.

00:58:00 I don't know whether there were other children in

Birkenau, because I never made any connection. I don't know. it

was not the kind of place where you asked people how old they were.

00:58:30 There were not such conversations. Not there.

Q: Did anyone look out for you because you were a child?

00:59:00 No, I think that the emotional shock

00:59:30 The environment, the people that walked around, the

continuous threat, of the kapos, I didn't take care of anybody, and

nobody took care of me. And I don't think that is unusual.

01:00:00 I have been asked if I tried to survive. Maybe the

answer is yes, but not consciously.

Q: As a French speaker, you were surrounded by people who were

speaking Polish etc. Did you have anyone to converse with? did

you understand what was going on?

A: No

01:00:30 No, I was just there. I was in such a minority. I

didn't know Yiddish, and I didn't speak Polish.

01:01:00 I think also, the reality of it, the faces changed, faces

disappeared. People died, or were sent to crematoriums.

01:01:30 My recollection, and it took me three times going back to

Auschwitz, the latrines, it took me until the third time to enter

the building because

01:02:00 My memory is the pushing and shoving and the inhumanity

to each other because how can one be human when dying. That's why

I said in the beginning that my mother

01:02:30 Could never have survived this. She could not have taken

two years of this. My youth is what gave me my strength. I don't

want bluntly to say that there weren't people who tried to help

others. Clearly, when we had to stand on "Apel,"

01:03:00 There was a great effort to see that everyone in the

barracks got out, because you knew that if someone did not, that

would be the end. So, yes.

01:03:30 There was support in helping people get on their feet,

but there was no lasting attachment. I wouldn't want to leave the

impression that people didn't try to be human to others. But there

was no

01:04:00 Lasting connection. But maybe that was an unconscious

way of protecting yourself because there had been so many losses.

Q: Do you want to talk about the kind of work you did?

01:04:30 For a while - some of it I will tell you, and some of it

not - but for a while I worked in the kitchen. Peeling potatoes.

I passed the spot when I was in Birkenau a few months ago.

01:05:00 I also moved stones from one spot to another. And then

back to the other spot. For a long, long time.

01:05:30 I also worked in the factory for a short time, making

ammunition.

01:06:00 Did you know where you were marching?

A: Absolutely not.

Q: Were there rumors that the war was lost or that the Americans

were coming.

01:06:30 A: Yes, I do remember. My language handicap kept me

much more distant for other people.

01:07:00 I didn't encounter many French-speaking people. When we

evacuated Birkenau, it was clear that the SS, the Kapos,

01:07:30 There was a desperation. This organization, with its

organized life, it was clear that something was happening that we

had to leave Auschwitz.

01:08:00 That the Germans did not have the upper hand anymore. I

can only talk about myself, I was too sick to think about

liberation.

Q: Aside from malnutrition, was there anything specific?

01:08:30 Malnutrition. It takes - living on a ration of food for

two years, takes everything out of you. It was pretty much of a

miracle that we could put one foot in front of another.

01:09:00 Q: And that's what you did, put one foot in front of

another, and at night you slept on the ground?

A: Yes, and I'm also conscious of trying to find the roots of

potatoes, in the fields that we would pass.

01:09:30 Trying to find the roots of something to get some

nourishment. My mouth, by this time was in such deplorable state.

01:10:00 That I couldn't chew anymore. So it was literally

putting one foot in front of another.

01:10:30 I think the early separation, the first one being when I

went into the boarding school.

01:11:00 The second separation, at the railroad, was so traumatic

to me, that my defense was not to feel anymore.

01:11:30 It was as simple as that - or as difficult. Because I'm

so geared to young people, so committed to committed to fighting

against stereotyping

01:12:00 I try to look at people as people and learn the right

lessons from history and not become desperate form what is going

round in the world.

01:12:30 Because in many ways we have not learned at all, and I

have to convince myself to do my own thing in my own way to have

some peace. To bring it back

01:13:00 communication, an explanation, being explicit with

people, frankness is so important in my life now.

01:13:30 Because I've suffered so much from not being told, living

in the dark, being open and frank with young people.

1:14:00 Its so much healthier. Bring me back.

Q: The death march. Did you stay in Ravensbruck?

A: Yes, but not for long.

01:14:30 By that time the Germans were being encircled.

Q: And than to Buchenwald, and then was when you gave up?

A: Yes

01:15:00 Then I was liberated, when to a military hospital, and

was sent to Belgium by the Red Cross. I got good care there - I

was very young.

01:15:30 There was very little distinction between adults and

children because there were no children (in the hospital). Its

interesting - when you have a shaved head, everybody looks alike.

01:16:00 I was on a military train. My brother, and an old aunt

and uncle of my mother had attempted to trace all of the people in

the family who were not around anymore.

01:16:30 My name was on the list of people who were being traced,

and that's how I landed back in Brussels. This old uncle and aunt

advised my brother who was in Holland living with

01:17:00 my father's brother who had been hidden during the war.

My brother came to get me and I went t live with him, my father's

sister, who had come out of Bergen-Belsen

01:17:30 I lived in Holland for five years, until 1950, learned

Dutch, and never spoke of my experience. I was never asked. My

aunt, who had been in Bergen-Belsen

01:18:00 was the one person who could talk to me. I was very

close to her; it was a great loss to me when she died. She could

talk to me about my mother and father. Those who did not go to

camp could not talk me.

01:18:30 In hindsight, I fully understand it. It had taken me

till the

01:19:00 I went back to Auschwitz the first time in 1978. I just

wonder sometimes if

01:19:30 I had been in an environment in which I was encouraged to

talk, if that wouldn't have been healthier for me.

01:20:00 As I'm talking t you I'm thinking about it. Probably the

answer would be yes. I know it was done in good faith. People

didn't want to hurt me.

01:20:30 Did they understand that I was sad, hurt, that it was

healthier to talk? That was about the time I got in touch with

facing history.

01:21:00 That helped me, through I still am not a big talker.

Q: What was your brother's experience?

A: I have absolutely no idea. He has never talked about it.

01:21:30 My aunt and I, we never talked about it. There has been

so much silence in my life.

01:22:00 Sometimes I think that I should help him, now that I am

a healthier person. I'm as guilty as everyone else - I don't want

to hurt him. I'm convinced that

01:22:30 I would be better for him to speak. But he has to have

a choice. I will be seeing him next month in Paris.

01:23:00 We talk on the telephone quite regularly. I don't know -

its scary.

01:23:30 The very scary part - he has three sons and they have

little understanding of what happened. His oldest son was here

with me

01:24:00 a couple of months ago. His name is Paul Henri. My

mother's name was Esther Henry. My father was Henri. My brother

gave him the name of Paul Henri.

01:24:30 And I said, "Paul Henri," something or other. And he

said, you're the only one who calls me Paul henri. He said

everyone called him Paul. I said I called him Paul Henri because

his name was so significant to me.

01:25:00 He said, "Why", and I was speechless. I made it my

business to talk to him, and his wife was tremendously helpful.

01:25:30 I pulled some pictures and we looked together. He asked

me questions about his father and grandparents I happened to have

a video

01:26:00 of the trip we had, with Facing History, one part of it,

the evening before we went to Birkenau, I did some speaking before

the group.

01:26:30 Then he went back to Holland. I will see him next month

in France. I think it gets to my brother, either because I want to

respect his choice

01:27:00 or because I don't have the guts, I'm committed to

telling my nephews something of their heritage. It struck me.

01:27:30 The time I feel the best is when I go into the classroom

and I do very little of it because there are better speakers than

I, but when I have, and I feel I have touched the life of one kid.

01:28:00 Then I feel good, and it struck me that I don't have to

go into the classroom. My family doesn't know a thing about it.

So that's my story.

01:28:30 Q: You lived in Holland 1945 to 50, and that's where you

left me?

A: Ok, I learned Dutch, and I learned English. I was exempt from

English in school because they didn't think English would be

important in my life.

01:29:00 There's a whole gap in my education. The last two years

I went to the School of Social Work in Rotterdam.

01:29:30 I earned my Master's in social work. In 1940, there was

an opportunity for me to come to the United States. Friends of

uncle

01:30:00 sponsored me and I decided - actually my aunt and uncle

decided it would be good for me but I don't know why. My brother

at that point left living in Indonesia.

01:30:30 Jakarta, and I came to the United States. My uncle took

on a tremendous amount of burden after the war.

01:31:00 It was a good idea for us to leave and try to set up a

life. It was an easy separation. I spoke French and Dutch and

America was the kind of opportunity.

01:31:30 One think I forgot was that I didn't speak English. So

I stuffed envelopes at R.H. Macy's. This was in Manhattan. I

stayed with friends of my uncle.

01:32:00 New York is so anonymous but it fitted what I thought I

needed. And I stuffed envelopes for a long time.

01:32:30 Until I went to a school for the foreign born and learned

English. I spent my lunch hours calling agencies and was

continually asked if I had American experience. The chief

executive officer of a company

01:33:00 of five people. I am very successful professionally.

The thought of not working

01:33:30 is very threatening to me. I have to stay occupied. I

think it goes much deeper than that. I think it goes

01:34:00 deeper than that. I think it's a matter of self-esteem.

I think if you work, and you're fine.

01:35:00 I guess I have to keep on going. It's so much instilled

in me. I just have to keep on going.

01:35:30 I think a lot about the years in Birkenau, about the war.

I don't think that many days that pass that

01:36:00 there's not something that will remind. Or phrases that

people use. let it pass.

01:36:30 I am very aware that it's an issue for me. I have to be

careful to keep it in focus, because not have strong bonds, then

you can't lose them.

01:37:00 And if you have them, then you risk to have tremendous

pain again. So, any way

01:37:50 I've talked more this afternoon than for a long time, if

ever. You are a wonderful interviewer.

.END.